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ABSTRACT

This description of the Africa Bibliographic Centre (ABC) concept--which is still in a formative stage--provides brief summaries of the 12 components of the system, including an African lending library, bibliographic publishing, a commission on information and bibliographic systems, an African microfiche publications center, African abstracting and SDI services, an African media magazine, an African bibliographic database, the use of ultrafiche, and a distribution center of source materials from Africa. Since 1974, the ABC Newsletter has been edited by the ABC Secretariat in Dar es Salaam, which is also involved in testing the feasibility of the ABC Africa Index (the African periodicals index). (Author/JEG)

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AFRICA BIBLIOGRAPHIC CENTRE (ABC): AN EXPERIMENT IN AFRICAN DOCUMENTATION AND LIBRARY RESOURCE SHARING

by

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I. Pan-African Bibliography and Documentation

The idea for Pan-African resource sharing in documentation and bibliographic control has been proposed in one form or another since the early sixties. In 1967, for instance, the Nairobi Conference on African Bibliography passed three resolutions (nos.17-19) concerned with the international coordination of bibliographic data on the African continent. Resolution 17 recommended the establishment of a network of coordination and of a "documentation centre provided with key-punching and computer equipment" to link national and regional centres in Africa and centres in other countries.

However, details for the idea were not worked out until 1973 when three librarians - Robert T. Jordan, Kebreab Wolde Giorgis and Talaat A. Wadood presented a paper on their concept of an "Africa Bibliographic Centre" to the 3rd session of the International Congress of Africanists held in Addis Ababa. The Congress endorsed the concept and recommended that "a centre for African Information - documentation - bibliography be established under the auspices of the OAU and/or the ECA" The ABC newsletter and the ABC Secretariat currently based in Dar es Salaam is the initial outcome.

II. The ABC Concept

The concept of the ABC encompasses twelve components as summarised below.

1. AFRICAN LENDING LIBRARY: (ALL)

An African continental version of the National Lending Library for Science and Technology in the U.K. (now BLLD) would supply photocopies of most requested items. It would ideally assume responsibility for meeting a substantial number of the photocopy requests received annually from African countries by the BLLD. The ALL would concentrate on African publications, plus those publications which are both in heavy demand and expensive to obtain from outside the continent, whether about Africa or not. Many such items are beyond the scope and resources of most libraries in Africa. Theses and research reports would be included. ALL would be modelled on the BLLD. The original ABC proposal projected a target of 20,000 serial titles and 300,000 monograph titles in an ALL if it was to become the library of first resort for African research workers. This would certainly put it among the largest institutions in Africa.

2. BIBLIOGRAPHIC PUBLISHING:

This facet of the proposal envisaged three constituent parts: African Books in Print; an African periodicals index and a Pan-African bibliography. The first of these has now begun to appear commercially in England outside the context of the ABC but there is still scope to implement the idea as envisaged in the original ABC proposals.

3. COMMISSION ON INFORMATION AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC SYSTEMS:

The objective of such a Commission would be to provide a consultative service on the coordination, planning and implementation of information network development, to help establish model documentation policies, standards, procedures and legislation - with the primary emphasis on laws of deposit. The Commission would be involved in the monitoring of developments in such relevant technical fields as telecommunications and computers. It would coordinate regional and national bibliographic and photocopying projects and establish links with other similar bodies, including UNISIST.

4. AFRICAN MICROFICHE PUBLICATIONS CENTRE:

This centre would specialise in acquiring copies of such materials as government and legal publications, mimeographed papers, documents, theses and research reports, patents, standards, conference proceedings, and privately printed fugitive materials. Such fugitive material is often essential for research, yet typically is difficult to locate and obtain except at prohibitive expense in terms of time, travel, and personal visits. The number of copies may be limited, and it may be impossible to obtain more than one copy. But if a recognised centre, run cooperatively by member countries, were to acquire such material and make it available, when cleared for distribution, and on microfiche, then the problem would become much less serious. Sets of

'fiche' could be sold by subscription in subject or area packages, divided perhaps by language, dept of coverage, or other criteria.

5. AFRICAN ABSTRACTS:

An abstracting service for locally produced scholarly journals and other material could relatively easily be based on the periodicals index and the microfiche centre components outlined above. The number of abstracting services currently being published do not seem justified by the use made of them particularly in the Humanities. However, locally produced journals as well as report literature and government publications are not easy to obtain because of their non-commercial mode of production and distribution. In such a case 'African abstracts' could be a valuable service backed up by the ALL component.

6. AFRICAN CURRENT AWARENESS

An SDI service would be an extension of the 'African periodicals index' and 'African abstracts' designed to fit the interest profiles of individual subscribers.

7. AFRICA MEDIA REVIEWS:

A regular magazine with an independent editorial staff publishing signed reviews by qualified experts, for circulation to libraries, information centres and individuals, would provide authoritative

and timely information on African publications on a systematic basis. There are similar review journals currently appearing in the United States, Britain and India. Such a journal in Africa might also stimulate the market for locally-produced books and journals.

8. COMPUTER DATA BASES:

On-line access to large stores of data from remote terminals is now commonplace in developed countries, particularly in the areas of science, technology, medicine and the social sciences. ABC might initially offer hard-copy output from external data bases.

9. AFRICAN BIBLIOGRAPHIC DATA BASE:

The functions of a data-base with a uniform machine-readable bibliographic format and on-line remote terminals would include:

A. Storage and exchange of cataloguing information.

B. Centralised production/distribution of cards.

C. Serials control

D. Communication of photocopy request.

E. Remote catalogue access.

F. Help in the production of national bibliographies and library catalogues.

The new PANAFTEL telecommunications network using satellites is unlikely to be available for such purposes for some years, so cheap computer link-ups across Africa are still a long way in the future.

10. THE USE OF ULTRAFICHE:

Ultrafiche was originally developed in order to make 'instant libraries' commercially available to new institutions. One 'fiche can contain as many as three thousand pages, but is as easily legible as an ordinary microfiche containing only 100 pages. The cost per bibliographic unit is one-fifty of the cost of books in hard binding. Even so, the available collections are costly and contain only a small proportion of materials relevant to African needs. No one African library can afford to buy all these collections, but a central institution housing a "collection of collections" could make them available when needed, and eventually begin to produce selected African materials in ultrafiche itself.

11. INFORMATION PACKETS:

Many published or semi-published items - posters, conference papers, pamphlets, and similar materials - are available in quantity at low cost; but there is a need for a developed and sophisticated system of distribution. A neutral non-profit organization such as ARC would be an appropriate mechanism for the distribution of such "non-priced" or unpriced materials. The organization of such a service could parallel that of the microfiche centre and the ALL itself, with a subscription service for different subjects, areas or languages. Such material might be specially appropriate for use in secondary schools.

12. SCARCE MATERIALS FROM AFRICA:

Increasing emphasis has been laid in recent years on the use of primary source materials in individuals research. The use of primary research materials is a very political issue in some countries and its distribution in packets like the "Jackdaw" series or the Zambian "African Archives Files" as proposed by the original authors may well prove impossible.

The elements of the ARC are mutually self-supporting and if operated in a single institution within the Africa continent would constitute a viable bibliographic documentation complex.

Some of the components may not be implemented nor realisable or even in demand for a number of years. The precise direction that the ARC will take in future will depend on many factors such as the zeal of the personnel involved, the interest and demand generated within and outside Africa and not least of all, finance available. It is hoped, however, that it will be possible for Africa to develop not simply forty or fifty national information systems and resource centres but also a continental resource and information center.

It is not the intention of ARC to compete with and/or preclude national bibliographies and information systems; rather, it presupposes the establishment of national bibliographic centres, libraries and other resource centers and hopes to supplement such establishments.

III. Present Status of the ABC.

Since the introduction of the proposals outlined above, several steps have been taken to implement at least some of the proposals. In April 1974 the ABC Newsletter was initiated as "a forum for exchange of views and news on the development of an African Bibliographic Centre". Six of the first seven issues appeared from Addis Ababa, the exception was a special issue produced at the IFLA Conference in Washington D.C. in November 1974. In April 1976 the Newsletter began to appear from Dar es Salaam, where it is currently issued and from where seven issues have already been published. With the change of venue, the character of the Newsletter has also been changed. The editorial board now hopes that the Newsletter can fulfil a dual role: as a forum for discussion of the ABC concept, and, in addition, as an effective medium for communicating news of developments, conferences, projects and surveys in ABC-related areas.

The Newsletter is distributed free to some 123 individuals and institutions in 34 African countries (out of a total of 49 OAU member states); it goes to an additional 47 recipients in North America, Europe and Asia.

The Secretariat is currently attempting to include a section on developments in Africa in the fields discussed above. We have to admit that there is a danger that the focus will be on Tanzania and Ethiopia but we hope that this will be eliminated as the Newsletter

becomes accepted as an effective communication medium.

ABC Africa Index

In addition to the Newsletter the Secretariat is currently involved in testing the feasibility of one of the constituent parts, namely, the African Periodicals Index, to be called the ABC Africa Index. A pilot issue has just been completed covering scholarly journals published in Africa. Only issues for 1975 or published in 1976 have been indexed.

In all 57 titles were selected for the pilot issue. Since the authors had to rely on the resources of the library of Dar es Salaam the main emphasis is on East African publications as the following breakdown shows:-

Tanzania	- 19	Tunisia	- 1
Kenya	- 16	Others (PCA)	1
Uganda	- 3		
Senegal	- 4	Total	57
Nigeria	- 3		
Ghana	- 2		
Liberia	- 1		
Zambia	- 2		
Zaire	- 1		
Rwanda	- 1		
Ethiopia	- 1		
Madagascar	- 1		
Algeria	- 1		

- 1

Enquiries have already been made for librarians and other interested institutions to co-operate in this project and some positive replies have been received. It is also hoped that beginning with the first issue of the ASC Africa Index, the Secretariat will begin a collection of the periodicals indexed which might then form the nucleus of the ASC component described above.

IV. Prospects for the ASC

The ASC concept is still in its formative stage. There has been a sustained attempt to sound out opinions about the ASC among librarians in Africa and in USA in other continents. The latest encouragement has come from the second meeting of the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians in Zambia in October 1976.

The current Secretariat is confident that there is a general recognition of the need for an ASC and is looking for ways to establish at least some of the original concepts. Processes are underway to get the ASC registered as a Society/organization locally. We hope we can do this also at international level.

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& ASC Secretariat